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Le Christ de Maurice Blondel, ed. René Virgoulay, Jésus et Jésus-Christ 86, Paris: Desclée, 2003, 229 pp.

When seeking to have the title of his doctoral dissertation on action inscribed at the Sorbonne in 1887, Blondel was first told that it possessed insufficient philosophic merit for approval. It was fortunate that in his determination to pursue his chosen topic he laid the foundations of a Christian philosophy that profoundly shaped modern French theology. This major study of his christology includes contributions by seven leading Blondel scholars which, prepared collaboratively, are of a consistently high standard.

Yvette Périco sheds new light on how, in Blondel's early years, his philosophy develops in the context of Christian scripture, faith and observance. The Gospels show, he believes, that action alone provides the power of manifesting love and receiving God, being rooted in reality (le réel) yet implying an absolute principle. Suffering and love constitute, more specifically, the most complete forms of action because their essence is adherence to Christ. A call to put on these and other more specific faces of Christ's action is provided by the liturgical cycle and frequent communion: the marginality of the Nativity, the meeting of reason and faith of the Epiphany, the redemption of the Passion and the glory of the Resurrection. In communion, humanity encounters the sensible absolute (le sensible absolu) and itself become transubstantiated. As with the Eucharist, so with action: faith does not hinder it, but completes it, allowing the communication of human and divine will in a 'secret nuptial' between them.

Marie-Jeanne Coutagne considers the cosmic element of Blondel's christology, sometimes referred to as his Panchristism. Not only human action, but the consistency of the world as well, imply the action of Christ. The material order cannot be considered as no more than a product of human reflection, or even worse, simply ignored. These insights originate in Blondel's secondary Latin thesis examining Leibniz's concept of the eucharistic bond of

substance (vinculum substantiale), which provides the topic for the following essay by Claude Troisfontaines.

Pierre de Cointet discusses Blondel's later little-known systematic works. Being a systematic philosophy of religion they merit close attention, replicating Hegel's achievement in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion from a catholic standpoint. A philosopher, Blondel argues, has a similar function to that of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the revelation of Christ. The descendent mediation of the Incarnate Word prepares the way for His ascendant mediation in which free and reasoning beings may attain their supernatural destiny and the universe its final consistence. Blondel fiercely opposes purely juridical theories of atonement. He understands the justice required by the Father and the obedience offered by the Son as possible only within a bond of love that becomes part of human reality, which includes the physical consistency of the world. Redemption moreover becomes complete only in the Resurrection. All this leads Blondel to restate his very high doctrine of tradition. If humanity is to be divinised in Christ and live in Christ, then redemptive Incarnation – in other words, the person and salvific action of Christ himself – must be transmitted through the history that He entered.

The collection helps to clarify Blondel's relation to what has often been termed, especially by its detractors, the 'Modernist' movement. Blondel is often placed within this movement purely, it seems, on the grounds that he was not a neo-Thomist. His Christology however opposes the construction of Jesus Christ as the object of historical and critical study proposed by prominent modernists such as Loisy, von Hügel and Tyrrell. For Blondel, it is rather in Jesus Christ as eternally begotten that tradition and dogma reside. He found common cause, at an intellectual level, with the 1907 encyclical Pascendi dominici gregis against those 'not sparing even the person of the Divine Redeemer, whom, with sacrilegious daring, they reduce to a simple, mere man' (§2). Blondel, by contrast, wishes to bind together the divine and

human natures in the one historical person: it is the Incarnation which makes possible the union of the super-natural and natural orders. This doctrine, for those willing to accept it, provides his metaphysics with an extremely powerful hermeneutic.

The collection goes some way towards identifying Blondel's impact on French theology and, above all, Jesuits theologians. Especially pertinent is the discussion by Coutagne of his links with Teilhard de Chardin, which shows that Blondel and Teilhard could eventually have agreed on a lot more than they in fact did. Blondel's eyesight began to deteriorate in 1926, the year when Teilhard began to write his classic theological work The Divine Milieu, and he never read this work of primary theological importance. Had Blondel been able to do so, he would have seen Teilhard's desire to assign to passion and suffering at least as important a place as action in his presentation of the Christian life, which he had found wanting in Teilhard's earlier works. A lot more could however be said about Blondel's links with Henri de Lubac and nouvelle théologie more generally, which is too often viewed as founded wholly on the challenge made to the Thomist synthesis of the philosophical tradition proclaimed by the 1879 encyclical Aeterni Patris by the rereading of patristic theologians in their own terms. In fact, the philosophical orientation provided by Blondel is of fundamental importance to De Lubac, whose efforts to harmonize—though never to equate—the natural and supernatural orders possesses, via Blondel, clear Leibnizian overtones.

It will be unfortunate if too many readers of this collection conclude from it that Blondel wishes to subject philosophical method to theological revelation. Its topic, and in places its exposition, might allow the impression that he can be cast as an ally of opponents of 'modernity'. In Action, Blondel certainly employs philosophical method to posit a theistic option which, he believes and argues, demands assent. The method of philosophy does not, however, derive its validity from theology. Christology makes possible, in contrast, the

mediation of the two distinct disciplines and is offered to those who have affirmed the option revealed to them of reasoning theologically.

[1,000 words]